

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

**STATEMENT OF ALAN FRONT,
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND,
SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES,
REGARDING H.R. 1230, AN ACT TO ESTABLISH
THE DETROIT RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
JUNE 21, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to offer the strong support of the Trust for Public Land for H.R. 1230 and the new Detroit River National Wildlife Refuge it will authorize, and to urge you to guide this important legislation to the timely enactment it deserves.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit organization that works with private landowners, public agencies, community leaders, and other partners to conserve landscapes with compelling natural, recreational, cultural, and other resource values. Since its founding in 1972, TPL has assisted in over 2,000 willing-seller public acquisitions involving well over a million acres of resource lands. From this on-the-ground perspective, I would like to share with the Committee my organization's clear, experience-born understanding that

- the proposed Detroit River refuge is comprised of unique, and uniquely threatened, wetlands that rank in importance alongside the critical areas Congress previously has authorized for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service stewardship;
- the moment is at hand to conserve these lands or to lose this opportunity forever; and
- the bill you are considering today, owing to Congressman Dingell's careful craftsmanship, is the best mechanism for meeting community and ecological needs, and of promoting the public/private partnerships in Michigan and internationally that will be needed to safeguard this vital area.

The resource values of Detroit River are diverse and compelling. The river corridor is home to some 65 fish species, including a huge annual spawning walleye fishery of international renown; dozens of waterfowl species that together comprise a

migratory population of over three million ducks and geese; and over 150 nesting bird species in all. A key to the wildlife importance of Detroit River, which flows through the meeting-place of the Atlantic and Central Flyways, is its location. Since this 18-mile stretch of river flows through an area of substantial urbanization, location also is a central factor in its history and continuing importance as a major commercial and transportation corridor. And by extension, this urban location – and this urban land-use pattern – also have played a major role in the resource threat that makes passage of this legislation so vital.

Over 95 percent of the historic riverine wetlands along the Detroit River have been lost to development, floodwall construction, and other physical constraints to tidal flows and meanders that once nourished this

wetland ecosystem. Yet the remainder of the corridor – the river islands, marshlands and pocket wetlands that punctuate the stretches of commercial and other structures along the river – provide exceptional habitat for diverse wildlife in extraordinary numbers. Especially given the degree of habitat conversion and loss, these undeveloped remnants of the river's past are all the more important to sustain the area's resident and migratory wildlife populations. On the other hand, restoration of many of these sites is critical to maintain and enhance their natural values. And especially given the continued pressure for additional development, permanent protection of these parcels is the only true means of staving off additional construction and stemming the area's egregious habitat losses.

H.R. 1230 as introduced by Congressman Dingell is a carefully balanced approach, a helping hand rather than an iron fist, to address these restoration and land protection needs. Like other legislation approved by this Committee, the bill authorizes acquisition of refuge lands for public management and stewardship. But the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge Act also includes a variety of provisions specific to the needs of this unique place: provisions that are generating remarkable partnership support locally, and internationally. With regard to land acquisition, the bill explicitly focuses on charitable land donations and willing-seller purchases, ensuring that all landowner participation will be by choice. It maintains an emphasis on historic public use by sportsmen and outdoor enthusiasts. It offers mechanisms for voluntary habitat management agreements between the Fish & Wildlife Service and its private neighbors. And with respect to a huge and enormously important public neighbor, it provides for coordination with Canadian authorities on cooperative approaches to habitat improvement between their side of the river, where conservation already has begun, and our own.

The Trust for Public Land has been working with many of the potential willing sellers and donors of wetland properties, ranging from pristine habitat lands to degraded but restorable habitat enhancement opportunities. Through this work, we have seen the groundswell of community support for this conservation proposal. We can assure the Committee that there is a large, representative sample of Detroit River landowners who are working with TPL to design conservation strategies for their properties in ways consistent with and inspired by this legislation. And we can assure you of our steadfast support of this visionary bill, which will make a habitat conservation solution possible for each of these landowners.

We look forward to working with you toward enactment of H.R. 1230, and to the remarkable cooperative model for conservation it will allow on the Detroit River.

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